

FIGURE 5



(Credit: UNDRP)

The family unit is the most basic coping mechanism in times of disaster. (Photo taken during the Mozambique floods of 1977.)

emergency, every effort is likely to be made to reach the family member to provide assistance even at risk to life. In a disaster situation family members move together and attempt to stay together.²³

Other family-related disaster behaviour includes family members attempting to meet as soon as a disaster has occurred or when one is impending, if possible in their own homes or sometimes in the homes of relatives or close friends. Families are likely to decide collectively how to react to a disaster, and are likely to remain together even when there is disagreement. If temporary separation is perceived as necessary, the decision for a member to leave — for instance, to search for someone — will be made with group consent and with agreement on when and where to reunite. Families also tend to filter the information received from rescue organizations and community leaders, with the result that individuals are not likely to follow recommendations from such sources unless they are supported by family decisions.²⁴

Persons separated from their families, especially children, have been found by many researchers to register a higher frequency of emotional difficulty than persons not separated. Child-family relationships are particularly important. Although relatively little is known about the psycho-social effect of disasters on children, the studies which have been undertaken suggest that they usually suffer only minor disturbance if a parent is with them. The often quoted statement of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlington, while related to a war-time situation, is also of relevance to natural disaster situations.

The war acquires comparatively little significance for children so long as it only threatens their lives, disturbs their material comfort, or cuts their food rations. It becomes enormously significant the moment it breaks up family life and uproots the first emotional attachments of the child within the family group.²⁵

Programme implications

The concern and support provided by families is constructive and should be encouraged. Family solidarity may

²³ Thomas E. Drabek, "Social Processes in Disaster: Family Evacuation", *Social Problems*, 16 (Winter), p. 346.

²⁴ Hultaker and Trost, *op. cit.*, p. 17

²⁵ According to Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlington's "Reactions to Evacuation", in *Uprooting and After* (Zwingmann and Pfister-Ammende) p. 67.

require certain special factors to be taken into consideration, for example the additional time likely to be needed to respond to warnings if people first discuss information and prepare to act as a family unit. This underscores the need for timely public information about an impending situation to provide families with the opportunity to reunite and make necessary arrangements. It also points to the need for reliable public information during and after a disaster, when concern for family members is likely to be particularly important.

Special services may also be required to facilitate the exchange of information between family members within and outside an affected area. Public administrators can be expected to receive large numbers of requests to verify the situation of particular individuals or families, a post-disaster requirement which is very time-consuming and usually requires personnel, communications and transport facilities. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a special programme to meet the need for post-disaster inter-family communication and verification, in order to minimize disruption of other services.

It is desirable to assist families to reunite or stay together. Separating families for such purposes as administrative convenience or to facilitate the delivery of welfare services is inadvisable. In consideration of the needs of children, every effort should be made to reunite separated children with their families and communities. The placement of orphaned or separated children should be guided by the principle of continuity, the least harmful approach being one in which the past relationships of a child are preserved in a family setting. In order to minimize the trauma of a disaster, and enable victims to cope better, the dictum "women and children first" should only be applied subject to the phrase "when accompanied by husbands and other close family"²⁶

- 4 PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE. *The psychological response of affected persons is likely to vary within any affected population. While stress symptoms are likely to be exhibited in a majority of the population, victims are not likely to be incapacitated nor are most likely to suffer psychological impairment over the long-term.*

A stressful or traumatic experience is incorporated in the broader experience of a person, just as is any other significant event. The significant impact of a disaster experience can be seen in the fact that such events commonly become a reference point for the remainder of the person's life, with annual remembrance of the day, frequent recounting of details and events, etc. However, stress or the experience of a traumatic event is not necessarily incapacitating. In fact, persons often interpret traumatic experiences later as "growth" experiences, in which inner strengths and coping mechanisms were developed.

The psychological response of affected persons is of course not uniform but will vary between persons both in length of time and degree of impairment, ranging from no impairment for some to total disfunction for others. While the "psychological effects" and the factors precipitating impairment are still being defined and debated, social science studies suggest that the stressful experience of a major disaster has not incapacitated affected populations. The basic human response to traumatic experience seems to be one of rational action and appropriate coping.

Programme implications

The assumption that disaster victims are not psychologically overwhelmed is most likely to be reflected in the way in which those offering assistance interact with the affected community. If victims are believed to be "psychologically overwhelmed", people providing assistance may be inclined to assume a directive role and make decisions that victims would normally make themselves, even about such essentials as food, clothing, shelter, etc.

Although those providing assistance may have the best of intentions, when the role of the individual is lost and the "helper" begins to make decisions which the individual being "helped" would normally make, the consequences are likely to be negative. Such assistance is likely to increase feelings of loss and disadvantage. The immediate response of victims is appreciation, but in situations where the typical roles and responsibilities of a person are assumed by those providing assistance, this sense of appreciation commonly changes to resentment.

Experience has shown that both men and women suffer disorientation if they are denied the opportunity to perform their usual roles in relation to the family. If people are provided with services over an extended period at relief centres, for example, women may find that they have neither the duties nor the status associated with care of the household, and additional anxieties may result for men who may not have the opportunity to work as the provider for the family.

However, many adverse socio-psychological effects can be mitigated by adequate training for those who may be in a position to help persons with particular problems. It can be helpful, for example, if doctors and other members of the medical profession are reminded of the many psychological and psychosomatic factors which may be encountered in the weeks and months following a major trauma. Supporting workers, providing advice on how and where to refer patients with non-medical needs, will assist other parts of the welfare system to do an effective job.

5. NEED FOR INFORMATION. *There are intense pressures from the public for immediate information about victims, secondary threats, and emergency needs and activities following disasters. In effect,*

²⁶ Taylor, *op cit*

*people seek to reduce uncertainty about the event, its consequences, and the appropriate personal actions to be taken.*²⁷

Information collection and exchange is a major issue after emergencies, as people attempt to identify needs and facts in order to define the most appropriate courses of action. Experience suggests that post-disaster information exchange is problematic due to the widespread demand for accurate information from all sectors, and complicated by the fact that initial reports are usually fragmentary, of questionable accuracy, and that disaster needs and problems change rapidly.

Programme implications

Every effort should be made to provide as factually accurate an account of damage, needs and victim behaviour as possible, since information is required not only by victims but also by administrators for the formulation of action plans.

The fragmentary nature of initial reports suggests the need for systematic assessments of places and issues, rather than merely relying upon whatever information is haphazardly provided. It is helpful to provide such information to the general public as well as within the administrative system. After the 1977 cyclone in Sri Lanka, it was noted that public meetings between local Government officials and communities were very useful in examining the effectiveness of the relief system, understanding the problems at hand, explaining the decisions taken, and informing people about the measures to be expected. Such meetings are also valuable to administrators to obtain feedback, identify unrecognized problems, and answer questions.

6. THE CARRY-OVER PRINCIPLE. *Post-disaster problems (or their absence) are closely related to pre-disaster problems (or their absence).*²⁸ *Behavioural patterns, social issues and processes which existed before an emergency are likely to exist afterwards.*

Disaster situations are seen as occasions of great change, or the opportunity for change. It is often assumed that destruction and confusion will give rise to a new social order, that disaster situations are opportunities for making substantive changes in values or correcting social injustices. While changes do occur as a result of disasters,

experience has shown that the overwhelming individual and social emphasis is on a return to pre-disaster normality. An emergency situation does not usually alter the psychological make-up or the response pattern of an individual, or change the social fabric of a community. A disaster is best perceived as a social interruption, with most social dynamics later returning to their pre-disaster norm. In predicting behaviour during or following a disaster, past conduct is still the best guide for predicting future conduct.²⁹ Victims use new behaviour for immediate emergency needs but do not change either their basic values or their priorities.³⁰

Programme implications

The "carry-over principle" is applicable to most aspects of disaster situations. Individual behaviour and social norms are likely to remain the same before, during and after a disaster, with parents continuing their family roles; people continuing to function in their working environment whether they perform manual, commercial, technical or administrative work; administrative structures and processes remaining essentially the same; and organizational modes of working and levels of effectiveness unlikely to change. Such social continuity provides the framework for anticipating the needs which may arise and the resources that are likely to exist after a disaster.

Such things as eating habits, living arrangements and forms of dress are very unlikely to change merely as a consequence of a natural disaster. This point is important for determining what relief assistance is likely to be most appropriate and acceptable. The fact that an emergency is not likely to change people's patterns or habits is substantiated by many anecdotes of relief goods which, while appropriate in one community or country, are considered inappropriate or unusable in another. Concerning the construction of post-disaster shelter and housing, there are many examples of apparently innovative housing forms which seemed like "good ideas" but were not acceptable to recipients, or raised expectations beyond the economic means of the community.³¹

Disasters do in some situations accelerate processes and changes already taking place within a community. It is within this framework that facilities are often upgraded and new equipment acquired. However, disaster-affected communities usually resist efforts to make major changes, and attempt instead to return to pre-disaster normality.

²⁷ Kreps, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁸ Quarantelli, *op. cit.*, p. 1

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

³⁰ Hultaker and Trost, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

³¹ UNDRO, *Shelter after Disaster* (Geneva, Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, 1982).